

Cathedral: Eucharist: Trinity 11: 10 a.m.

Our three readings today focus on God's grand project for the human race. Isaiah's vision promises the Jews exiled in Babylon that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, God will deliver and redeem all humanity. In the Gospel, Peter revealed that moment of deliverance when he probably surprised himself by exclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah. Writing to the Romans in AD57, Paul looks forward to what Christ's death and Resurrection means in practice for those who believe that Jesus is God's Chosen One.

The Letter to the Romans is Paul's most complex work in which he teases out the consequences of what was then for Jewish members of the church in Rome a new way of seeing their traditional beliefs, and for gentile converts a radical departure from anything they had previously understood. In our Cathedral Library, only commentaries on St. John's Gospel outnumber those on Paul's Letter to the Romans; apart from the four Gospels, no other

document has had more influence on Christian teaching.

We have to thank Paul's vision for the words we use at the Peace: 'we are the Body of Christ'. Earlier in the letter, Paul has looked at what God has done; now he looks at how as a result, we as Christians are meant to behave. Paul sees us each as members of the human body with their different functions, but his really important idea is that we are members one of another. We certainly see ourselves as a group of individuals committed to following Christ's teachings, but members one of another? An outsider looking at us now and at Christian behaviour over two millennia would be inclined to say, 'Oh really'?

If we have fallen short of what was expected, it is because Christians have sometimes misunderstood that idea of the Body of Christ. Today, most people outside the Church, and many in it, see it primarily as several organisations, each with separate rules, hierarchy and rituals, springing from a common core

of history, and belief. The Church is the most enduring, and used to be the most influential institution in western civilisation. Its rituals and teachings still give hope and meaning to what are often hard and drab lives. The Church saved Western civilisation after the fall of Rome. It preserved learning; developed schools, universities and hospitals, and provided some care for the poor. The church erected glorious buildings; sponsored high art and soaring music. Influence however brought wealth and power with all its temptations, which at the Reformation tore it apart with bloodshed and persecution into many mutually hostile denominations. Today, that hostility has largely gone, and now the church no longer controls what people think or do, it is humbler and better for it.

Our bodies are not collections of limbs and organs enveloped in skin, which may or may not get on with one another. A colleague said that we feel healthy when we are largely unaware of the workings of our body. The body is a unity in which if something

malfunctions the whole is liable to suffer. Whilst we are inclined to equate being alive with being conscious, the body is not a hierarchy ruled by the brain, but a multitude of simultaneous conversations between all its constituents. We spend about a third of our lives asleep; most of what goes on inside us isn't under our control; even most of what happens in the nervous system never reaches consciousness. I am standing vertically in the pulpit, but were I speaking of any other subject than the body that fact would scarcely impinge on my consciousness; I should be focussed on my delivery and that what I was saying wasn't gibberish. I would be keeping upright because the nerve impulses from my eyes, my inner ears, the soles of my feet, my muscles and the sensors in the joints of my legs and spine were being coordinated many times a second, at several levels below the conscious, mainly in the spinal cord and lower brain. Even if the floor were to shift, the lower brain would have taken steps to attempt to restore the status quo, milliseconds before I became conscious of it. For all this to happen, these organs

must be supplied with blood carrying oxygen and glucose.

Although Paul had no knowledge of modern biology, he knew intuitively that the body's workings required a high degree of harmony between its parts. He therefore uses this image as an ideal for the church. The fact that he brought up the topic in his letter probably meant that this was lacking in its recipients, not surprisingly given that the church at Rome had only recently come into being, and was mixture of Jews and gentiles from very different cultural backgrounds. Two thousand years on Paul's ideal has rarely been realised, nevertheless this spiritual harmony is the ideal we must aspire to.

Looking at our country and the wider world there is little cause for cheer. Though affluent, our society is becoming increasingly atomised. We probably see ourselves as individuals first, next as members of a family and only then as part of the wider community. It is no longer normal for people to remain in the

place where they grew up; they often no longer work where they live; they may move several times during their careers; the different generations in a family become separated, and older people are less seen as source of communal wisdom, but more as a problem to be managed. Paul tells the Romans not to think too highly of themselves; by contrast, the consumer economy with its imaginative advertising and many choices, particularly concerning clothing and lifestyles, encourages us to believe that we can each become the centre of our own universe. Modern communications divide as well as unite us; we may have seen a group seated in a café, ignoring each other, while texting on their mobile phones. Don't we sometimes long to hear a live human voice when we contact an organisation, rather than to be told 'for sales press 1'? Social media encourages people to make aggressive and abusive statements as well as to conduct conversations.

Paul told his readers not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their

minds. Although the church is not just any other organisation, but the Body of Christ, because God took flesh and suffered for us, it cannot escape temptation and is not immune to the current climate. Anger in the Anglican Communion, particularly over sexuality, is not abating, with the various protagonists hurling dogmatic statements at one another from entrenched positions. Harmony will be difficult to restore. In a choir, to achieve harmony, the singers, however good their voices and however well they know their own part, must while singing their own line, attend to their neighbour, the other parts, the conductor's beat and the accompaniment. Perhaps the gift we most need from the Spirit is that of attention to others.

We could argue that unless we are terminally self-centred or preoccupied we do attend to other people, but there are many times when others need our full attention, and we fall short. St Benedict set the gold standard for attention in his rule, when he told his brothers: 'All who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ'. If we were to encounter Christ

we should certainly give Him the same rapt attention as He would give us, the attention that a lover gives to the beloved. Of course not all encounters require that intensity, but every encounter should be open to the possibility.

We open ourselves to this possibility as we attend to God through our private prayers, and in the Eucharist, where we are present to one another, and scripture, shared ritual, and hymnody prepare us to receive the sacrament in which the God who is eternally present to every particle of his creation is present to us in bread and wine, and we to Him. On a more mundane level we do it at coffee after the service, as do those of us who volunteer and welcome our visitors. Regular worship and prayer renew our minds and transform us, so that attention becomes a habit of the heart, as natural to us as the workings of our bodies.

The world is awash with people whose gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion or politics means that they are never welcomed as Christ, but treated as less

than human, sometimes worse than domestic animals, as mere chattels and unworthy of any compassion. Millions today are being starved, tortured, trafficked, enslaved, and driven from home and country. Jesus died and rose for all humanity. William Temple said that the Church is the only organisation that exists for those who are not its members. As Christ's body, we are not a mutual spiritual self-improvement society. We are being transformed, so that through us the Spirit can transform the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God where all humanity finally will be members one of another in Christ.